The Last Shot

BY

FREDERICK PALMER

SYNOPSIS.

At their home on the frontier between the Browns and Grays Marta Galland and her mother, entertaining Colonel Westerling of the Grays, see Captain Lanstron, staff intelligence officer of the Browns, injured by a fall in his aeroplane. Ten years later. Westerling, nominal vice but real chief of staff, reinforces South La Tir, meditates on war, and speculates on the comparative ages of himself and Marta, who is visiting in the Gray capital. Westerling calls on Marta. She tells him of her teaching children the follies of war and martial patriotism, begs him to prevent war while he is chief of staff, and predicts that if he makes war against the Browns he will not win. On the march with the 53d of the Browns Private Stransky, anarchist, decries war and played-out patriotism and is placed under arrest. Colonel Lanstron overhearing, begs him off. Lanstron calls on Marta at her home. He talks with Feller, the gardener. Marta tells Lanstron that she believes Feller to be a spy. Lanstron confesses it is true. Lanstron shows Marta a telephone which Feller has concealed in a secret passage under the tower for use to benefit the Browns in war emergencies. Lanstron declares his love for Marta. Westerling and the Gray premier plan to use a trivial international affair to foment warlike patriotism in army and people and strike before declaring war. Partow, Brown chief of staff, and Lanstron, made vice, discuss the trouble, and the Brown defenses. Partow reveals his plans to Lanstron. The Gray army crosses the border line and attacks. The Browns check them. Artillery, infantry, aeroplanes and dirigibles engage. Stransky, rising to make the anarchist speech of his life, draws the Gray artillery fire. Nicked by a shrapnel splinter he goes Berserk and fights—"all a man."

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

But would one? He understood that with their smokeless powder the Gray guns could be located only by their flashes, which would not be visible unless the refraction of light were favorable. Then "thur-eesh—thur-eesh" above every other sound in a long wail! No man ever forgets the first crack of a shrapnel at close quarters, the first bullet breath on his cheek, or the first supporting shell from his side in flight that passes above him.

"That is ours!" called Dellarme.

"Ours!" shouted the sergeant.

"Ours!" sang the thought of every one of them.

Over the Gray batteries on the plain an explosive ball of smoke hung in the still air; then another beside it. "Thur-eesh — thur-eesh — thur-eesh," the screaming overhead became a gale that built a cloud of blue smoke over the offending Gray batteries—beautiful, soft blue smoke from which a spray of steel descended. There was no spotting the flashes of the Browns' guns in order to reply to them, for they were under the cover of a hill, using indirect aim as nicely and accurately as if firing pointblank. The gunners of the Gray batteries could not go on with their work under such a hail-storm; they were checkmated. They stopped firing and began moving to a new position, where their commander hoped to remain undiscovered long enough to support the 128th by loosing his lightnings against the defenders at the critical moment of the next charge, which would be made as soon as Fracasse's men had been reinforced.

There was an end to the concussions and the thrashing of the air around Dellarme's men, and they had the relief of a breaking abscess in the ear. But they became more conscious of the spits of dust in front of their faces and the passing whistles of bullets. In return, they made the sections of Gray infantry in reserve rushing across the levels, leave many gray lumps behind. But Fracasse's men at the foot of the slope poured in a heavier and still heavier fire.

"Down there's where we need the shells now!" spoke the thought of Dellarme's men, which he had anticipated by a word to the signal corporal, who waved his flag one—two—three—four—five times. Come on, now, with more of your special brand of death, fire-control officer! Your own head is above the sky-line, though your guns are hidden. Five hundred yards beyond the knoll is the range! Come on!

He came with a burst of screams so low in flight that they seemed to brush the back of the men's necks with a hair broom at the rate of a thousand feet a second. Having watched the result, Dellarme turned with a confirmatory gesture, which the corporal translated into the wigwag of "Correct!" The shrapnel smoke hanging over Fracasse's men appeared a heavenly blue to Dellarme's men.

"They are going to start for us soon! Oh, but we'll get a lot of them!" whispered Stransky gleefully to his rifle.

Dellarme glanced again toward the colonel's station. No sign of the retiring flag. He was glad of that. He did not want to fall back in face of a charge; to have his men silhouetted in the valley as they retreated. And the Grays would not endure this shower-bath long without going one way or the other. He gave the order to fix bayonets, and hardly was it obeyed when he saw flashes of steel through the shrapnel smoke as the Grays fixed theirs. The Grays had 500 yards to go; the Browns had the time that it takes running men to cover the distance in which to stop the Grays.

"We'll spear any of them who has the luck to get this far!" whispered Stransky to his rifle. The sentence was spoken in the midst of a salvo of shrapnel cracks, which he did not hear. He heard nothing, thought nothing, except to kill.

The Gray batteries on the plain, having taken up a new position and being reinforced, played on the crest at top speed instantly the Gray line rose and started up the slope at the run. With the purpose of confusing no less than killing, they used percussion, which burst on striking the ground, as well as shrapnel, which burst by a time-fuse in the air. Fountains of sod and dirt shot upward to meet descending sprays of bullets. The concussions of the earth shook the aim of Dellarme's men, blinded by smoke and dust, as they fired through a fog at bent figures whose legs were pumping fast in dim pantomime.

But the guns of the Browns, also, have word that the charge has begun. The signal corporal is waiting for the gesture from Dellarme agreed upon as an announcement. The Brown artillery commander cuts his fuses two hundred and fifty yards shorter. He, too, uses percussion for moral effect.

Half of the distance from the foot to the crest of the knoll Fracasse's men have gone in face of the hot, sizzling tornado of bullets, when there is a blast of explosions in their faces with all the chaotic and irresistible force of a volcanic eruption. Not only are they in the midst of the first lot of the Browns' shells at the shorter range, but one Gray battery has either made a mistake in cutting its fuses or struck a streak of powder below standard, and its shells burst among those whom it is aiming to assist.

The ground seems rising under the feet of Fracasse's company; the air is split and racked and wrenched and torn with hideous screams of invisible demons. The men stop; they act on the uncontrollable instinct of self-preservation against an overwhelming force of nature. A few without the power of locomotion drop, faces pressed to the ground. The rest flee toward a shoulder of the slope through the instinct that leads a hunted man in a street into an alley. In a confusion of arms and legs, pressing one on the other, no longer soldiers, only a mob, they throw themselves behind the first protection that offers itself. Fracasse also runs. He runs from the flame of a furnace door suddenly thrown open.

The Gray batteries have ceased firing; certain gunners' ears burn under the words of inquiry as to the cause of the mistake from an artillery commander. Dellarme's men are hugging the earth too close to cheer. A desire to spring up and yell may be in their hearts, but they know the danger of showing a single unnecessary inch of their craniums above the sky-line. The sounds that escape their throats are those of a winning team at a tug of war as diaphragms relax.

With the smoke clearing, they see 20 or 30 Grays plastered on the slope at the point where the charge was checked. Every one of those prostrate forms is within fatal range. Not one moves a finger; even the living are feigning death in the hope of surviving. Among them is little Peterkin, so faithful in forcing his refractory legs to keep pace with his comrades. If he is always up with them they will never know what is in his heart and call him a coward. As he has been knocked unconscious, he has not been in the pell-mell retreat.

His first stabbing thought on coming to was that he must be dead; but, no; he was opening his eyes sticky with dust. At least, he must be wounded! He had not power yet to move his hands in order to feel where, and when they grew alive enough to move, what he saw in front of him held them frigidly still. His nerves went searching from his head to his feet and—miracle of heaven!—found no point of pain or spot soppy with blood. If he were really hit there was bound to be one or the other, he knew from reading.

Between him and the faces of the Browns—yes, the actual, living, terrible Browns—above the glint of their rifle barrels, was no obstacle that could stop a bullet, though not more than three feet away was a crater made by a shell burst. The black circle of every muzzle on the crest seemed to be pointing at him. When were they going to shoot? When was he to be executed? Would he be shot in many places and die thus? Or would the very first bullet go through his head? Why didn't they fire? What were they waiting for? The suspense was unbearable. The desperation of overwhelming fear driving him in irresponsible impulse, he doubled up his legs and with a cat's leap sprang for the crater.

A blood-curdling burst of whistles passed over his head as a dozen rifles cracked. This time he was surely killed! He was in some other world! Which was it, the good or the bad? The good, for he had a glimpse of blue sky. No, that could not be, for he had been alive when he leaped for the crater, and there he was pressed against the soft earth of its bottom. He burrowed deeper blissfully. He was the nearest to the enemy of any man of the 128th, and he certainly had passed through a gamut of emotions in the half-hour since Eugene Aronson had leaped over a white post.

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"Confound it! If we'd kept on we'd have got them! Now we have to do it all over again!" growled Fracasse distractedly as he looked around at the faces hugging the cover of the shoulder—faces asking, What next? each in its own way; faces blank and white; faces with lips working and eyes blinking; faces with the blood rushing back to cheeks in baffled anger. One, however, was half smiling—Hugo Mallin's.

"You did your share of the running, I'll warrant, Mallin!" said Fracasse excitedly, venting his disgust on a particular object.

"Yes, sir," answered Hugo. "It was very hard to maintain a semblance of dignity. Yes, sir, I kept near you all the time. Wasn't that what you wanted me to do, sir?"

Three or four men burst into a hysterical laugh as if something had broken in their throats. Everybody felt better for this touch of drollery except the captain. Yet, possibly, it may have helped him in recovering his poise. Sometimes even a pin-prick will have this effect.

"Silence!" he said in his old manner. "I will give you something to joke about other than a little setback like this! Get up there with your rifles!"

He formed the nucleus of a firing-line under cover of the shoulder, and then set the remainder of his company to work with their spades mak-

A Blood-Curdling Burst of Whistles Passed Over His Head.

ing a trench. The second battalion of the 128th, which faced the knoll, was also digging at the base of the slope, and another regiment in reserve was deploying on the plain. After the failure to rush the knoll the Gray commander had settled down to the business of a systematic approach.

And what of those of Fracasse's men who had not run but had dropped in their tracks when the charge halted? They were between two lines of fire. There was no escape. Some of the wounded had a mercifully quick end, others suffered the consciousness of being hit again and again; the dead were bored through with bullet holes. In torture, the survivors prayed for death; for all had to die except Peterkin, the pasty-faced little valet's son.

Peterkin was quite safe, hugging the bottom of the shell crater under a swarm of hornets. In a surprisingly short time he became accustomed to the situation and found himself ravenously hungry, for the strain of the last 12 hours had burned up tissue. He took a biscuit out of his knapsack and began nibbling it, as became a true rodent.

CHAPTER X.

Marta's First Glimpse of War.

As Marta and the children came to the door of the chapel after the recitation of the oath, she saw the civil population moving along the street in the direction of the range. There was nothing for Marta to do but start homeward. The thought that her mother was alone made her hasten at a pace much more rapid than the procession of people, whose talk and exclamations formed a monotone audible in its nearness, despite the continuous rifle-fire, now broken by the pounding of the guns.

"It's all done to beat the Grays, isn't it, Miss Galland? They are trying to take our land," said Jacky Werther as Marta parted from him.

"Yes, it is done to beat the Grays," she answered. "Good luck, Jacky!"

Yes, yes, to beat the Grays! The same idea—the fighting nature, the brute nature of man—animated both sides. Had the Browns really tried for peace? Had they, in the spirit of her oath, appealed to justice and reason? Why hadn't their premier before all the world said to the premier of the Grays, as one honest, friendly neighbor to another over a matter of dispute:

"We do not want war. We know you outnumber us, but we know you would not take advantage of that. If we are wrong we will make amends; if you are wrong we know that you will. Let us not play tricks in secret to gain points, we civilized nations, but be frank with each other. Let us not try to irritate each other or to influence our people, but to realize how much we have in common and that our only purpose is common progress and happiness."

At the turn of the road in front of the castle she saw the gunners of the batteries making an emplacement for their guns in a field of carrots that had not yet been harvested. The roots of golden yellow were mixed with the tossing spadefuls of earth.

A shadow like a great cloud in mad flight shot over the earth, and with the gunners she looked up to see a Gray dirigible. Already it was turning homeward; already it had gained its object as a scout. On the fragile platform of the gondola was a man, seemingly a human mite aiming a tiny toy gun. His target was one of the Brown aeroplanes.

"They're in danger of cutting their own envelope! They can't get the angle! The plane is too high!" exclaimed the artillery commander. Both he and his men forgot their work in watching the spectacle of aerial David against aerial Goliath. "If our man lands with his little bomb, oh, my!" he grinned. "That's why he is so high. He's been waiting up there."

"Pray God he will!" exclaimed one of the gunners.

"Look at him volplane—motor at full speed, too!"

"Into it! Making sure! Oh, splen—O!" cried the artillery commander.

A ball of lightning shot forth sheets of flame. Dirigible and plane were hidden in an ugly swirl of yellowish smoke, rolling out into a purple cloud that spread into prismatic mist over the descent of cavorting human bodies and broken machinery and twisted brace, flying pieces of tattered or burning cloth. David has taken Goliath down with him in a death grip.

An aeroplane following the dirigible as a screen, hoping to get home with information if the dirigible were lost, had escaped the sharpshooters in the church tower by flying around the town. However, it ran within range of the automatic and the sharpshooters on top of the castle tower. They failed of the bull's-eye, but their bullets, rimming the target, crippling the motor, and cutting braces, brought the crumpling wings about the helpless pilot. The watching gunners uttered "Ahs!" of horror and triumph as they saw him fall, gliding this way and that, in the agony of slow descent.

"Come, now!" called the artillery commander. "We are wasting precious time."

Entering the grounds of the Galland house, Marta had to pass to one side of the path, now blocked by army wagons and engineers' materials and tools. Soldiers carrying sand-bags were taking the shortest cut, trampling the flowers on their way.

"Do you know whose property this is?" she demanded in a burst of anger.

"Ours—the nation's!" answered one, perspiring freely at his work. "Sorry!" he added on second thought.

Already parts of the first terrace were shoulder-high with sand-bags and one automatic had been set in place. Marta observed as she turned to the veranda. There her mother sat in her favorite chair, hands relaxed as they rested on its arms, while she looked out over the valley in the supertranquility that comes to some women under a strain—as soldiers who have been on sieges can tell you—that some psychologists interpret one way, and some another, none knowing even their own wives.

"Marta, did any of the children come?" Mrs. Galland asked in her usual pleasant tone. So far as she was concerned, the activity on the terrace did not exist. She seemed oblivious of the fact of war.

Marta's monosyllable absently answering the question was expressive of her wonder at her mother. Most girls do not know their mothers much better than psychologists know their wives.

"Marta, whatever happens one should go regularly about what he considers his duty," said Mrs. Galland. "They have been as considerate as they could, evidently by Colonel Lanstron's orders," she proceeded, nodding toward the industrious engineers. "And they've packed all the paintings and works of art and put them in the cellar, where they will be safe."

The captain of engineers in command, seeing Marta, hurried toward her.

"Miss Galland, isn't it?" he asked. "I have been waiting for you. I—I—well, I found that I could not make the situation clear to your mother."

"He thinks me in my second childhood or out of my head," Mrs. Galland explained with a shade of tartness. "And he has been so polite in trying to conceal his opinion, too," she added with a comprehending smile.

The captain flushed in embarrassment.

"I—I can't speak too strongly," he declared when he had regained his composure. "Though everything seems to be safe here now, it may not be in an hour. You must go, all of you. This house will be an inferno as soon as the 53d falls back, and I can't possibly get your mother to appreciate the fact, Miss Galland."

"But I said that I did appreciate it and that the Gallands have been in infernos before—perhaps not as bad as this one that is coming—but, then, the Gallands must keep abreast of the times," replied Mrs. Galland. "I have asked Minna and she prefers to remain. I am glad of that. I am glad now that we kept her, Marta. She is as loyal as my old maid and the butler and the cook were to your grandmother in the last war. Ah, the Gallands had many servants then!"

"This isn't like the old war. This place will be shelled, enfiladed! And you two—" the captain protested desperately.

"I became a Galland when I married," said Mrs. Galland, "and the Galland women have always remained with their property in time of war. Naturally, I shall remain!"

"Miss Galland, it was you—your influence I was counting on to—" The captain turned to Marta in a final appeal.

Mrs. Galland was watching her daughter's face intently.

"We stay!" replied Marta, and the captain saw in the depths of her eyes, a cold blue-black, that further argument was useless.

Now came the sweep of a rising roar from the sky with the command to attention of the rush of a fast express-train past a country railway station. Two Gray dirigibles with their escort of aeroplanes were bearing toward the pass over the pass road. The automatic and the riflemen in the tower banged away to no purpose, but the central sections of the envelope of the rear dirigible had been torn in shreds; it was buckling. Clouds of blue shrapnel smoke broke around its gondola. A number of field-guns joined forces with a battery of high-angle guns in a havoc that left a drifting derelict; the remainder of the squadron had completed its loop and was pointing toward the plain.

From a great altitude, literally out of the blue of heaven, high over the Gray lines, Marta made out a Brown squadron of dirigibles and planes descending across the track of the Grays.

The Gray dirigibles, stern on, were little larger than umbrellas and the planes than swallows; the Brown dirigibles, side on, were big sausages and their planes specks. To the eye, this meeting was like that of two small flocks of soaring birds apparently unable to change their course. But imagination could picture the fearful clash of forces, whose wounded would find the succor of no hospital except impact on the earth below.

She Looked Up to See a Gray Dirigible.

Marta put her hands over her eyes for only a second, she thought, before she withdrew them in vexation—hadn't she promised herself not to be cowardly?—to see one Brown dirigible and two Brown aeroplanes ascending at a sharp angle above a cloud of smoke to escape the high-angle guns of the Grays.

"We've got them all! No lips survive to tell what the eye saw!" exclaimed the engineer captain, his words bubbling with the joy of water in the sunlight. "As I thought," he continued in professional enthusiasm and discrimination.

With high-power binoculars glued to his eyes, he then turned to see if the faint brown line of Dellarme's men were going to hold or break. If it held, he might have hours in which to complete his task; if it broke, he had only minutes.

Marta came up the terrace path from the chrysanthemum bed in time to watch the shroud of shrapnel smoke billowing over the knoll, to visualize another scene in place of the collision of the squadrons, and to note the captain's exultation over Fracasse's repulse.

"How we must have punished them!" he exclaimed to his lieutenant. "How we must have mowed them down! Lanstron certainly knew what he was doing."

"You mean that he knew how we should mow them down?" asked Marta.

Not until she spoke did he realize that she was standing near him.

"Why, naturally! If we hadn't mowed them down his plan would have failed. Mowing them down was the only way to hold them back," he said; and seeing her horror made haste to add: "Miss Galland, now you know what a ghastly business war is. It will be worse here than there."

"Yes," she said blankly. Her colorless cheeks, her drooping underlip convinced him that now, with a little show of masculine authority, he would gain his point.

"You and your mother must go!" he said firmly.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Three Pictures from God's Album

By REV B. B. SUTCLIFFE
Assistant Superintendent of Men, Moody Bible Institute, Chicago

TEXT—Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent towards Sodom. But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.—Gen. 13:12, 13.

Someone has said that the Old Testament is God's picture gallery where he has given us in picture form the doctrines and truths he develops in the New Testament. Our text has three of these pictures, in which three classes of persons are described—Abram, Lot and the men of Sodom.

Living for Self.

Taking these in reverse order, we can see how the men of Sodom illustrate a large number of people today. They are those whose underlying principle might be termed living for self alone. They do not care for real religion, but are occupied entirely with the things of time and sense. What they will eat today or what they will wear tomorrow is to them vastly more important than how they will stand before God in the future. Their effort is concerned with this life alone, and they live and work and play as though there were no such thing as eternity and no such person as God. They come to the end like the man who told himself he could retire from business because he had much goods laid up for many years and he could now afford to enjoy the fruits of his toil and eat, drink and be merry. But he had laid up all his goods on the earth; they were not taken from him, but he was taken from them, and it is no wonder the Lord says he was a fool. The class under consideration are not necessarily bad people, for usually they are tolerant of religion, as the people of Sodom did not mind having Lot in their midst. But the religion that Lot had was not very insistent. When it would threaten to interfere with business or with pleasure it must not be heard. It was time then to laugh it out of court as a sort of fable, and when it became personal Lot was to

Living for Self and God.

The second picture is that of Lot, in whom the half-and-half Christian is easily seen. This man illustrates those who seem to have, as the underlying principle of life, the idea of living for self and for God too. They attempt to serve two masters, and, failing to serve either, come to the end with nothing to show for their labor. They trust their own vision and live by sight and not by faith. Lot looked on the well-watered plain and, as far as he could see, it was the very thing he ought to have, the very thing that was best for him. But, as God saw, it was the very thing he ought not to have, the thing that was worst for him. He hazarded everything he had or hoped to have—himself, his family, his property—on what he could see with his own eyes, when he might have chosen what God could see. He trusted himself rather than God and the results were inevitable. He lost what God would have given him and he lost the enjoyment the men of Sodom had; for all the time he was there his righteous soul was vexed. He was neither out and out for self nor out and out for God. He had tried to live for God and self, he had tried to serve two masters and to get both the wealth of Sodom and the wealth of God. But he ended with awful disaster, losing his property, his testimony, his family—all that he had.

Living for God.

The last picture is that in which the "out-and-out" Christian is seen in Abram. The underlying principle of his life seems to be that he had made up his mind to serve God alone. He was far from being a perfect man. He made many mistakes and even committed some sins. But underneath he was living for God. He had learned "thou shalt have no other God before me" and his life was governed by this principle. He recognized that he could serve only one master with any hope of success and he chose to have the Lord as that one Master. What he was and had and hoped to be belonged to that Master to do with as the Master desired. Where he was to be and go depended on that Master's direction. He would not lean to his own understanding nor judge by the sight of his eyes nor walk by his own wisdom. He would gladly take the seeming second best from God, believing that whatever appearances might say, they could not tell the whole truth.

The men of Sodom lived for self alone and lost themselves and all they had; Lot lived for self and God and lost all he had of peace or power or property; Abram lived for God alone and, while he was not a perfect man, there was given to him the peace of God and power for God and possessions from God. "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve."

There is no death. What seems so is a transition.—Longfellow.